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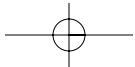
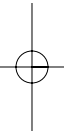
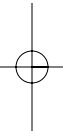
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Part II

Familiarity and 'Stranger-ness'



5

Making the Familiar Strange: A Case for Disengaged Organizational Ethnography

Sierk Ybema and Frans Kamsteeg

I never saw the east coast
until I moved to the west ...
I never saw the morning
until I stayed up all night
I never saw your sunshine
until you turned out your lovelight babe
I never saw my hometown
until I stayed away too long

Tom Waits¹

Ethnographic fieldwork typically involves the development of close connections between the ethnographer and the subjects and situations being studied (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Lofland, 1995; Prasad, 2005); that is, 'living with and living like those who are studied' in order to understand what the anthropologist Malinowski first called the 'native's point of view' (Van Maanen, 1988: 2, 49–50). In order to understand 'what goes without saying' (Bloch, 1997: 22 ff.), intimate knowledge of other people's lifeworlds is indispensable. However, while 'immersing' is generally acknowledged as a central feature of good ethnographic field research, its logical counterpart – 'distancing' – is a neglected topic in methodological textbooks, notwithstanding the obligatory warning 'not to go native'. It can be argued, however, that 'distance' is equally as important as 'closeness' for an adequate understanding of the 'natives' and, indeed, becomes crucial exactly when a researcher gets immersed in the field. Fieldworkers run the risk of becoming socially bound up with their field sites and thus becoming increasingly 'templated' by that field (Parkin quoted in Mosse, 2006: 936), particularly when they delve into contexts that are somewhat familiar to them, as is often the case in organizational ethnographic research. Researchers who do their fieldwork not in some isolated tribe but in their own global village are much closer to their 'natives' than anthropologists traditionally used to be, if only

because the researched are often physically or virtually 'within reach'. So, for organizational ethnography, 'the real voyage of discovery begins not with visiting new places but in seeing familiar landscapes with new eyes' (Marcel Proust, quoted by Bate, 1997: 1148). Consequently, the fieldworker's strategy must be 'making the familiar strange rather than the strange familiar' (Van Maanen, 1995: 20).

In classic studies in anthropology, the fieldworker was initially an outsider to the social setting, unfamiliar with the culture studied. Strangeness was considered to be crucial for understanding:

Anthropologists went to study foreign societies on the assumption that an outsider would be able to understand and analyse the culture of a group more keenly than those who carry it. 'It would hardly be fish who discovered the existence of water', Kluckhohn has remarked (in Wolcott, 1975: 115). Or as Agar (1980) phrases it, the ethnographer purposefully assumes the position of a 'professional stranger', for an outsider is presumably free of the same blinkers the carriers of a culture wear – albeit dressed in a different set – and is therefore more able holistically to interpret it. The intent of this position is that the ethnographer has a heightened sense of awareness when in a context not her or his own, and is therefore more sensitive to the nuance of things. (Rosen, 1991: 15)

Whereas traditionally, its strangeness made an unknown culture attractive, a desire to bridge that strangeness through familiarization created the attractiveness of ethnographic writings. In these, strangeness was the given, and immersion in the field countered it. When 'ethnographing' within one's own culture (Chock, 1986; Tota, 2004) – and that is where organizational ethnography is often done – we *are* much more like fish trying to discover the water that surrounds us. For organizational ethnographers, the very 'un-strangeness' of the surroundings in their research prevents them from seeing it. So, when doing fieldwork in situations or settings that are or have become strongly familiar to us, strangeness is not a given but an achievement.

Organizational ethnographers (and their readers) are often relatively close to the field being studied, both socially and culturally. They often solve the problems of accessing closed organizational circuits through drawing on connections in their personal networks, entering sites that are familiar to them, and/or becoming professional insiders or even full members of the organization (see Beech et al., Chapter 10, this volume). In doing so, they substitute the boundaries that kept them out with those that keep them in, thus facing the problem, as Mosse put it, 'not of *entering a different world* so as to be able to imagine or infer the taken-for-granted ... but of *exiting a known world* for the same purpose' (Mosse, 2006: 936, our emphasis). Being close to the 'natives' – or even being natives themselves, as in the case of at-home ethnography (Alvesson, Chapter 8, this volume) – organizational ethnographers may have an easier access to culture members' own perspectives, while simultaneously experiencing more difficulties in divesting themselves of taken-for-granted understandings (see, for example, the special issue edited by Brannan et al., 2007; e.g., Hamilton, 2007).

Ethnographic research can be viewed as a recurrent process of ‘zooming in’ on local practices, and ‘zooming out’ through contextualization and theorizing (Nicolini, Chapter 6, this volume). Rather than focusing on the potential of this iterative movement between theory and data to solve the problem of immersion, we problematize and reflect on the process of zooming in and out. Studying organizational settings ‘in-depth’ and ‘up-close’ confronts researchers with the question of how to ‘resurface’: how to contrive to return to engaging the scientific practices of distanced observation and analysis. If ethnographic research today entails studying those ‘close by’ rather than some distant ‘other’, how do we avoid getting bogged down in a myopic gaze or becoming blinded by the overly familiar? How do we pull ourselves out of the morass of the mundanity of everyday organizational life and render ‘strange’ for ethnographic practice what is perceived to be ‘normal’ to the insider (Brannan et al., 2007)? And, if ‘there is nothing as seductive for the fieldworker as being made to feel like an insider’ (Kunda, 1992: 236), how do we step back and make sense of the situation from an outsider’s perspective (Fetterman, 1998: 11)?

To answer these questions we will first argue that ethnographic understanding develops through getting close to the organizational field, while simultaneously preserving the distance that will foster a capacity for the ongoing experience of surprise. This approach calls for a dual stance on the part of the researcher: being both immersed and estranged, thereby holding on to a basic wonder about the unexpected, the noteworthy, and the counterintuitive of everyday ‘normality’ and its governing rules (Pickering, 2001: 174 ff). Subsequently, we describe various strategies through which organizational fieldworkers have tried to stimulate the interplay between distanced interpretation and immersed observation, exploring, among other things, the roles of surprise, paradox, play, and irony.

involvement and detachment

A proclaimed strength of ethnographic research is its capacity to tap into ordinary life, describe it in depth and in detail, and develop an understanding ‘from within’. Organizational ethnography can in this way be seen as the art of exploring the complexities of everyday organizational life through immersion (as noted in the Introduction to this volume; see also Koot, 1995). Yet, at the same time, ‘complexity’ and ‘everydayness’ also pose problems for the ‘immersed’ researcher. The variety of field observations and the intensity of experiences when studying organizations ‘up close and personal’ are often confusing to such an extent that fieldworkers get ‘lost’ in the field, overwhelmed by the ‘complexity’ rather than capturing it. Likewise, when researchers get caught up in ‘everydayness’, organizational life may become as normal and ‘infra-ordinary’ (Perec, 1989) to them – and thus unworthy of observation – as water is to fish. If the mundane, taken-for-granted nature of everyday social life prevents culture members from seeing

the *emic* rules and routines ‘running the show’, why would researchers not also run the risk of blocking their observational and interpretive capacities when immersing themselves in a culture, rather than unlocking them? Everyday organizational life is often hardly exhilarating and tends to become ever more unremarkable as the researcher becomes more and more deeply engaged and embedded in the field. The confusing complexity and blinding normality of everyday life constitute the strength of the in-depth study of everyday ethnography as well as its inherent weakness: immersion in the field opens up, as well as constrains, new understanding.

Often, however, researchers accept immersion in the field uncritically as an inherent quality and unproblematic asset of in-depth organizational research, while underplaying the importance of distancing. John Shotter (2006), for instance, critiques the dominance of what he calls ‘aboutness-thinking’ in theorizing social processes. This kind of theorizing, Shotter (2006: 585) claims, is ‘mostly oriented toward helping us think about process “from the outside”, about processes that we merely observe as happening “over there”’. Invoking a good/bad contrast, Shotter argues for ‘understanding process from within’, through ‘thinking-from-within’ or ‘witness-thinking’:

Instead of turning away from events occurring around us, and burying ourselves in thought in an attempt to *explain* them within an appropriate theoretical scheme (thus to respond to them in our terms), we can turn ourselves more responsively toward them to respond to (aspects of) them *in their own* terms. In other words, seeing *with another's words in mind* can itself be a thoughtful, feelingful, way of seeing, while thinking *with another's words in mind* can also be a feelingful, seeingful, way of thinking – a way of seeing and thinking that brings one into a close and personal, living contact with one's surroundings, with their subtle but mattering details. (Shotter, 2006: 600, emphases in the original)

This ‘thinking-from-within’ is commonly what is understood as ethnography’s main purpose and strength. Following a similarly sympathetic as well as one-sided line of argument, ethnographers claim to offer the perspectives of the members of a culture, as well as their practices (Prasad, 2005; Van Maanen, 1988). Such scholars prioritize the context-specific experiences of those involved over pre-specified, universal or generalized categories and/or concepts developed *a priori* by the researcher. This is what is captured in talking about *emic* understanding as distinct from *etic* understanding (Headland, Pike and Harris, 1990). The former – which Geertz (1983) called ‘experience-near’ – refers to the situated knowledge held by members of the setting under study, whereas the latter – ‘experience-distant’ – is a set of rules or generalized principles abstracted from situation-specific lived experience.

A long-term engagement with those studied and understanding cultures ‘from within’ are among the central canons of all ethnographic research, and rightly so. Yet, assuming that insights can be derived solely ‘from within’, from holding another’s words in mind and leaving behind ‘our own terms’, is, as advice for social research, equally as unwise, one-sided and, therefore, inadvisable as it is sympathetic. The organizational ethnographer, like any

other ethnographer, needs to approach the field of study not only with a basic openness and empathic understanding, but also with 'a constant urge to problematize, to turn what seems familiar and understandable upside down and inside out' (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1992: 73). For practitioners of organizational ethnography, 'utilizing familiarity' is as important as 'working on strangeness' (Neyland, 2008: 101–02). This means that alongside thinking-from-within, ethnographic analyses should also entail preserving and developing 'thinking-from-without' in order to overcome blind spots for what to us is – or has become – usual, ordinary, routine, or familiar. This is far from easy, as Becker (quoted in Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 103) reminded us: 'It takes a tremendous effort of will and imagination to stop seeing only the things that are conventionally "there" to be seen'.

Ethnographic fieldwork, we believe, thus calls for a dual stance on the part of the field worker: an intimate familiarity with the situation that is simultaneous with the distance and detachment from it. This combination of proximity and distance is key to the ethnographer's main research method, participant observation, a term that captures both aspects. It tells us to combine the role of 'insider' with the role of 'outsider', a thought also captured in depictions of the ethnographer as a 'marginal native' (Freilich, 1970), 'professional stranger' (Agar, 1980), 'innocent ethnographer' (Barley, 1983), 'self-reliant loner' (Lofland, 1974), and 'simultaneous insider-outsider' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; see also Bartunek, 2002; Bartunek and Louis, 1992). The ethnographer's role in the field comes close to being both stranger and friend, according to Powdermaker (1966; see also Beech et al., Chapter 10, this volume):

Involvement is necessary to understand the psychological realities of a culture, that is, its meanings for the indigenous members. Detachment is necessary to construct the abstract reality: a network of social relations including the rules and how they function – not necessarily real to the people studied. (Powdermaker, 1966: 9)

Being 'intellectually poised between familiarity and strangeness' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 112), ethnographers may variously take up the role of insider and outsider (Duijnhoven and Roessingh, 2006), oscillating between the 'external' view of the observer to the 'internal' view of the participant, mediating 'experience-near' and 'experience-far' concepts when analysing findings (Geertz, 1973; Marcus and Fischer, 1986). In the interplay between emic and etic understandings (Lett, 1990) or, rather, between the emic models of both observer and observed, the ethnographer switches between 'witness-thinking' and 'aboutness-thinking'.

Acknowledging the importance of our role as a 'relative outsider' to the field includes allowing ourselves to experience feelings of unease and accepting a 'painful sense of separation between the observer and the observed' (Lofland and Lofland, 1995: 52). The discomfiting experience of being 'not one of them' or of feeling conflicting loyalties – 'a sense of schizophrenia' – does not

necessarily need to be avoided or replaced by a more comfortable sense of feeling 'at ease' or being 'one of them' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 114–17). Quite the contrary. Without wanting to romanticize the frustrations that come with doing fieldwork, we believe that confusion, estrangement, loneliness, wonder, annoyance, and any other distancing emotion experienced during fieldwork, while hardly joyful, can be vital sources of inspiration for a researcher. These emotions may put the researcher at a reflexive distance from the field, a marginal position from where s/he may see things differently. If the research setting does take on the appearance of routine familiarity, inquisitiveness may be drained, and one constantly needs, therefore, to be 'on the alert, with more than half an eye on the research possibilities that can be seen or engineered from any and every social situation' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 116). To make reflection and analysis sufficiently distanced, one should avoid feeling 'at home' and should never surrender oneself entirely to the setting or the moment: 'There must always remain some part held back, some social and intellectual "distance"'. For it is in the space created by this distance that the analytic work of the ethnographer gets done' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 115). For these reasons, the sense of alienation and 'strangeness' experienced by the fieldworker can be seen as an intrinsic and important component of good ethnography, a critical companion or counterpart to the widely acclaimed and well-described ethnographic tenet of establishing a 'deep' or intimate familiarity with the field of study (Lofland, 1995; Lofland and Lofland, 1995).

unremarkable yet unexpected

Our plea for a disengaged engaged organizational ethnographer is as much a warning (against over-familiarization) as it is encouragement, because not becoming a 'full-fledged member' allows fieldworkers to preserve the benefits of being a stranger 'on the margins' of the organization. Fieldworkers can see the extraordinary-in-the-ordinary and generate new, creative insights out of the marginal position of not being fully immersed in the field of study (Lofland and Lofland, 1995: 22–3).

Assuming that it is the unexpected that makes us 'eye the unremarkable' (Silverman, 2006), we may put our own surprise to use in our observations and interpretations. If ethnography's objective is 'to reveal things we did not know already, that surprise, even stun us', as Paul Bate (1997: 1165) suggests, then doing and writing ethnography are essentially about fostering, preserving, cultivating, and conveying the surprises that the ethnographer experienced in the field. The road to revelatory findings and 'stunning' interpretations begins with naive questions, confusion, and curiosity; that is, with starting to realize what is new and surprising to us as strangers to the field. Empirical and theoretical findings often stem from puzzlement about what does not make immediate sense and, therefore, a basic wonder about contradictions and 'counter-intuitions' may be useful throughout the research process – in generating data,

developing interpretations, enlivening the empirical narrative, and clarifying the relevance of the findings.

It is in this sense that we may view ethnographic fieldwork as a process of puzzling over and struggling to solve paradoxes. Rather than adopting a narrow definition of paradox, we follow Wittgenstein (1978: para 410) in defining a paradox broadly as 'something surprising'. Surprise is the essence of a paradox, because something is paradoxical when it is at odds with what we expected; that is, when experience runs counter (*para* = against) to expectation (*doxos* = opinion, expectation). It has frequently been pointed out that organizational researchers may gain new insights, create reflexive distance, or arrive at more sophisticated interpretations through a focus on paradox (see, for instance, Cameron and Quinn, 1988; Koot et al., 1996; Lewis, 1999; Poole and Van de Ven, 1989). A paradox provokes our presumptions, challenges our logic of things, and – if we keep an open mind – elicits our curiosity.

The close connections between ethnographic fieldwork and puzzling over paradoxes can be illustrated by invoking Wittgenstein's approach to the latter. Wittgenstein contended that 'something surprising, a paradox, is a paradox only in a particular, as it were defective, surrounding. One needs to complete this surrounding in such a way that what looks like a paradox no longer seems one' (1978: para 410). Wittgenstein tries to free the discussion of paradox from a strictly philosophical treatment, because, he argued, it hardly makes sense to reason in the abstract when trying to understand the brain-twisting logic of a paradox. We should rather try to understand the meaning of 'something surprising' in the everyday, resolving the paradox by placing it back into the original context in which it occurred. In this way, Wittgenstein takes on the attitude of an ethnographer, trying to understand what surprises him by picturing the 'complete surroundings'.

Two elements are crucial both to Wittgenstein's understanding of paradox and, we contend, to ethnographic (or, more broadly, all interpretive) research: (i) a basic wonder about the unexpected, the note-worthy, the counterintuitive of everyday realities ('something surprising'); and (ii) a recognition of the importance of context for a full understanding of something surprising ('completing the surrounding'). Ethnographers tend to prioritize immersing in the field (the second element) over distancing (the first element), while an approach through paradox takes 'something surprising' as its starting point for analysis, and then, as a second step, builds on an intimate knowledge of the 'surroundings'. Rather than solely or primarily seeking an insider's familiarity with the field, a focus on paradox takes advantage of that outsider's lack of familiarity with it. As researchers we are able to appreciate the idiosyncrasies and illogicality of everyday organizational life if we succeed in somehow preserving a newcomer's capacity for wonderment and in developing a habitus of surprise. Paradoxically, we are able to understand and describe the field *from the inside out* only if we approach it, in some way or another, *from the outside in*.

keeping distance and yielding surprise

If things that run counter to first impressions or firm expectations are essential to organizational ethnography, what 'tools' do we have or what strategies can we pursue to preserve our initial wonder about seeming contradictions and irrationalities, and how do we convey our sense of surprise to our readers? We need to develop a distanced, reflexive stance that enables us to defamiliarize ourselves from an overly familiar field, to denaturalize the field's taken-for-granted understandings, and to solve mysteries and foster our readers' surprise. To explicate and illustrate how surprise may produce unexpected insights and interpretations in organizational ethnographic research, we draw on others' organizational ethnographic monographs and our own research experiences. We outline various instances of distancing and yielding surprise: *strategies of theoretically informed interpretation* (sections one, two, and three below) that show some of the ways in which theory and distanced analysis may play a role in disengaging the immersed researcher, and *strategies of observation* (sections four, five, and six) that suggest various ways in which researchers may take advantage of an insider/outsider role. We read all six examples as taking a 'disengaged engaged approach' that tries to make the familiar look strange and stunning, helping the organizational ethnographer to maintain, develop, and convey surprise.

1 *Holding on to the mystery* 'Mystery ... is a good place to begin field research' (Schwartzman, 1993: 68). We can derive reflexive distance from building on our own surprise or that of the researched. By asking participants about their introduction and initiation into the organization being studied and reviving their surprises by re-imagining them, and relating them to their experiences in different organizational fields, the researcher may tap into surprises experienced by the researched. The researcher, on the other hand, may preserve or stimulate her or his own surprise through an active engagement with theory and analysis during the empirical phase of research. A focus on 'the unanticipated and unexpected – things that puzzle the researcher' (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2006: 1266) may inspire critical dialogues between theoretical assumptions and empirical impressions.

Surprise and attention to the unexpected – or what Agar (1986: 20) calls 'breakdowns' in understanding – are particularly important when ethnographing in a familiar culture. Agar (1986) advises ethnographers to set out to create such breakdowns by way of an 'anti-coherent attitude' in which 'understanding is suspect; you self-consciously try to show that "what I think is going on probably isn't"' (Agar, 1986: 50): 'Even when they [ethnographers] think they understand ... they work to bring about a problem in understanding' (Agar, 1986: 49). Following Agar, Alvesson and Kärreman (2006) speak of discovering and/or creating a mystery, suggesting that a researcher constructs a mystery, follows it through in research and, ultimately, theoretically grounds it as a new and remarkable finding.

To illustrate this, we draw on an example from the field research of the first author which shows that, in order to be able to hold on to our own naive wonder and develop our not-understanding into novel insights, we may have to accept a less than heroic role for ourselves. Rather than a triumphal march, fieldwork may then resemble more 'the position of the Mr Bean rather than John Wayne side of the ethnographer' (Jemielniak and Kostera, 2007).

The first person voice in this research narrative belongs to Sierk Ybema: in my first weeks of fieldwork within the editorial staff of a Dutch national newspaper, it puzzled me to find that the identity question for the editors – 'Who are we and what do we stand for as a newspaper?' – seemed to be a question to which they had no answer. Having read some of the literature that narrates stories of organizational members' firm positioning of a shared and stable collective self vis-à-vis competitors or clients, and which theorizes social identities, ethnic identities, and organizational identities in terms of continuity, distinctiveness and cohesion, it seemed strange to me that the paper's identity – the key symbol of their collective identity – seemed to present itself to or to force itself upon the editors as a problem. While I naively expected them to clarify the paper's central, distinctive and enduring characteristics (on the basis of, for example, ideas on organizational identity, see, e.g., Albert and Whetten 1985), the editors claimed that neither the ideological content of the newspaper nor the symbolic boundaries between different newspapers could define their collective identity in a clear, unifying, historically consistent way. Rather than impress an outside world of competitors, readers or the general public by making self-praising comparisons with 'others' (as is usually described in the identity literature), the editors emphasized the increasing *indistinctiveness* of the newspaper vis-à-vis its competitors or made self-disparaging comparisons with 'others'. The long time it took me to understand the implications of this observation was frustrating and confusing, but it was only through taking seriously my own confusion and refusing to accept a pre-given interpretation – that is, through bringing about a problem in understanding, creating and holding on to the mystery – that new insights emerged.

2 *Looking for the 'irrational'* Making the familiar strange through juxtaposing theoretical propositions and empirical findings has proven to be an exceptionally fruitful strategy in organizational ethnography. Some first instances of, at the time, groundbreaking and surprising findings in ethnographic work can be found in classic studies of bureaucracies and bureaucratic underlife. Authors such as Blau (1955), Dalton (1959), Gouldner (1954), Selznick (1949) and, in an earlier period, Mayo (1933), and Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939) made the everyday look surprising by revealing some of the then-unexpected characteristics found in the organizational underlife of rational-bureaucratic institutions and corporations, such as 'informal relations', dysfunctional behaviour, and everyday politicking. Ironically, these irrationalities often appeared to be the unintended, paradoxical consequences of so-called 'rational' management models

prescribed by Taylor or described by Weber, thus showing a disjuncture between the formal rules of a bureaucracy and informal organizational practices. By looking for the irrational aspects of rational organizing, these researchers gave us basic insights into management and its consequences: 'Whenever people act towards some purpose, the outcomes will be a mixture of what was hoped for by the action and what was unforeseen and possibly undesired' (Grey, 2005: 29).

A more recent example of looking for the irrational behind the rational can be found in Robert Jackall's (1988) *Moral mazes*. Presenting an ethnographic account of how corporate managers think and act and how large corporations shape managers' moral consciousness, Jackall describes the decisive role of patron-client relations, self-promotion, and sharp talk for climbing the corporate ladder. He shows how contemporary organizations are much closer to a 'patrimonial bureaucracy' than to a Weberian rational ideal type. In a similar vein, ethnographic studies of non-bureaucratic forms of organizing look for the irrational in non-standardized working methods, democratic ideologies, participatory leadership and forms of culture management, like bureaucratic dysfunctionality. Such studies show how these create their own unintended consequences, such as dreadfully slow decision-making processes, indecisiveness, and inertia (see, for example, Schein, 1991) or organizational members wholeheartedly embracing the member role prescribed for them by the culture (up to the point of burnout), as well as distancing themselves from their member roles (for example, Kunda, 1992). These descriptions of the unexpected, dysfunctional outcomes of rational and normative control show that an ethnographic focus on the often-unacknowledged 'irrationalities' of organizing can lead to important insights, thereby illuminating the surprising consequences of managerial control.

3 Making it look strange Another way an ethnographic researcher who is (or has become) too close to the 'natives' can 'distance' or 'defamiliarize' from the field is by using figures of speech in theorizing and writing in order to make the ordinary sufficiently 'strange' to be presented (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 191 ff.). This can be done, for instance, by applying anthropological concepts or ideas acquired from studies of foreign societies to our own society (Marcus and Fischer, 1986: 137ff). This is a common strategy in studies of organizational culture and symbolism, to 'defamiliarize' pre-given assumptions about the rationality or normality of management and organizing (Linstead, 1996: 18). Scholars may see formal structures as 'rationalized myths', portray organizations as 'savage tribes', describe new organization members' socialization processes as an 'initiation ritual', or illustrate how managerial discourse concerns the heeding of totems and taboos, resembling the ritualistic behaviour that helps to enhance managerial authority (for example, see Ingersoll and Adams, 1986; Linstead et al., 1996; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Concepts and insights from field studies of other settings – or any other unusual area of interest – may serve as inspiration for developing new understandings of processes of organizing. This strategy suggests that, when we are *not* studying 'strange' cultures, we might approach the field *as if* we were studying a strange culture.

We now turn our attention away from these three theory-informed interpretive strategies to make-the-familiar-strange, to several different observational roles organizational ethnographers may adopt in the field that will help to disengage and distance themselves from it.

4 *Breaking the friendship bond* One strategy for regaining reflexive distance is through literally moving out of the field and creating a breach in intimate relations with those researched. In successive immersions and retreats, a fieldworker may move in and out of the field, creating distance through visiting different sites, studying new situations, and talking to the other parties involved. In *Men who manage*, Melville Dalton (1959) reminds us that organizational ethnographic research requires a constant switching between careful and intimate contact and distance:

Studying [situations] at a distance the investigator may be so 'objective' that he misses his subject matter and cannot say just what he is objective about. Better, he alternately immerses himself in the areas he must know, steps out in the role of critic, reorients himself and re-enters. (Dalton, 1959: 283)

By zooming in on different practices (Nicolini, Chapter 6, this volume), doing multi-site ethnography (Marcus, 1998), following objects or shadowing subjects (Czarniawska, 2007), and investigating new subjects and settings, we may come across different readings of reality that can help us deconstruct taken-for-granted understandings. To illustrate what this 'side-stepping' might look like, we draw on a fieldwork example of the second author (see also Kamsteeg, 1998). Here, the first person voice is his.

Development agencies, like any other organization, produce smooth policy documents, which are at best only approximations of reality. When I started research under the umbrella of a Chilean non-governmental organization (NGO) in 1990, I was soon showered with testimonies of the efforts and reported results on the organization's struggle against Pinochet. I was welcomed as a member of the NGO-family and I developed a certain pride for working with people who had so bravely endured the regime's rule. My research on the effects of the NGO's religious (Pentecostal) change programme was heading towards a favourable outcome and, apparently, the effort and money spent (including large sums of Dutch donor money) had been worth it. But – with hindsight – something must have continued itching inside. Could this really be the complete story? Had I finally discovered the *rara avis* in the development world – a successful change programme? I certainly had noticed that the Pentecostal churches making all these development efforts had remained relatively small, whereas those churches that supported the Pinochet regime had grown rapidly. When I asked them to explain this, my hosts contended that the positive effects of all consciousness-raising efforts were doomed to produce church decline: true believers depended less on church leadership than those in the churches next door, who were still under the spell of their paternalistic and authoritarian pastors.

The self-congratulatory tone of this last remark made me cross the street and speak to members of these neighbouring congregations. I was surprised by the religious fervour displayed by their members, given what I had been led to expect. It was a confusing experience to see: so many church people following their leaders on a highly individual path to salvation instead of preaching political liberation. My friends were right that, here, religion was really keeping people socially and politically backward. Or was it? These 'brothers and sisters', seemingly happy in their politics-free but overcrowded community, warned me that the NGO I frequented was in fact run by only three families and had constituted a job machine (now in decline) for its church members. They urged me to talk to ex-members and ask how this 'nepotism' worked. 'What had this church accomplished except spending foreign money on well-paid jobs and well-furnished offices?', was the rhetorical question they asked.

Back in my Dutch university room, I realized that the image I had developed after 'talking to the enemy' was not necessarily more accurate than the beautiful dream I had been living in during the first part of my fieldwork. Yet crossing the boundary and seeing 'the enemy' of my friends had opened my eyes to some alternative views. For my friends, the fact that I went to their neighbours and took their views seriously was like betraying a trust relationship and spoiling the image of an organization that was so 'evidently' beyond all doubt. I paid the price of losing some friends by showing that they were no saints either (cf. Beech et al., Chapter 10, this volume). But I learned that immersion and (over) identification can inadvertently produce myopia.

5 *Distancing by immersion* Reflexive distance can be derived from literally distancing oneself as a researcher from the researched in order to refresh one's sense of surprise, but the opposite strategy might also be pursued. An example of ethnographic work creating and conveying surprise through immersion rather than distancing can be found in studies describing tensions between front-stage appearances and back-stage processes (see, for example, Goffman, 1983; Whyte, 1948). Fieldworkers investigate discrepancies between, for example, official organizational discourses and gossip and rumours, formal organizational design and informal politics, or what people say they do and what they can be seen to be doing (see the introductory chapter to this volume). Some studies describe, for instance, the marked contrast between amicability in public situations and animosities expressed in confidential conversations or, in a mirror image of this 'frontstage harmony/backstage conflict' pattern, how conflicts are fought out in meetings, after which the gamecocks reaffirm their collegiality in the bar (see, for example, Ybema, 1996).

David Collinson (1999) provides an example of the kind of surprise one can come across in behind-the-scenes research. Asked as a researcher to contribute to enhanced safety in an offshore organization after a huge disaster, Collinson conducted fieldwork on two oil platforms belonging to a North Sea operator as well as its head offices. In sharp contrast to official readings that reported the company's excellent safety record and contradicted managers' statements

in which they maintained that 99.9 per cent of all accidents were reported, Collinson's study revealed that the platform's employees strongly under-reported the actual number of accidents. Workers on the platform displayed a high degree of impression management, making it look as though a 'safety culture' existed while in fact concealing a 'blame culture'.

It would, then, be a mistake to interpret our argument for reflexive distance as an argument against deep familiarity. In fact, findings from behind-the-scenes research all illustrate how distancing from and immersing in the field may be interrelated. Paradoxically, enmeshing oneself in the field and becoming an insider who can come in 'through the backdoor' might well be a necessary precondition for distancing oneself from frontstage appearances. Ethnographic research, such as Latour and Woolgar's (1979) study of the everyday scientific work involved in establishing a 'fact' in a laboratory, may thus reveal, for instance, that 'hard data' and 'objectivity' in scientific work are largely myths that are constructed from talk. One has to get really close to people in order to discover and know for sure that they are 'bullshitting'.

6 'This fellow is wise enough to play the fool' (William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, Act 3, Scene 1) Finally, an ethnographer might play a role in the field that combines familiarity and strangeness by being oneself somewhat strange or out of the ordinary. As noted above, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) pointed out that preserving distance starts with sticking to the 'discomforting' experience of *not* being 'one of them' and remaining, at best, a strange insider. But is it necessarily discomforting to be a stranger? Surely, remaining strange runs counter to inner drives to socially 'belong' and become 'one of the guys'. Yet, rather than focusing only on negative emotions, a more fruitful strategy might be to explore the 'maverick-researcher' role as a positive experience.

Adopting a view of ethnography and 'ethnographing' as a form of 'fieldplay' (rather than 'fieldwork'), we contend that taking comfort in holding on to the initial surprise, and thus cherishing and creating estrangement rather than trying to overcome it, can be worthwhile. Maintaining and developing an outsider's perspective can, in some circumstances, be refreshing or even redeeming, even though playing the maverick might not always be the most appropriate role for an organizational ethnographer. Each of the five strategies described above are serious suggestions for serious scientists, but they derive from and presuppose playfulness in gathering and interpreting research findings. Rather than discovering 'truths' or reporting the natives' point of view, they invite researchers to develop new and creative, thought-provoking insights and interpretations that put things in a different, 'strange-making' light.

We contend that making-the-familiar-strange is a serious effort that can benefit from the sense of irony and playfulness typical of fools, clowns or comedians who subvert normality by offering an 'upside-down perspective' on social life. Perhaps organizational ethnographers are, or should be, much closer to playing the role of the 'organizational fool' (Kets de Vries, 1990) than they are willing to admit or accept for themselves. The 'organizational fool', as

described by Kets de Vries (1990), is inspired by the figure of the royal court jester we know from Shakespeare. Historically speaking, the medieval and Renaissance fools gradually became more or less servile extensions of the king (Zijderveld, 1982) – petty clowns within the king's inner circle who reconfirmed rather than upset normality. However, with Kets de Vries we prefer to draw instead on the mythologized version of the jester at the king's court that depicts him as the king's critical sparring partner, a person who subtly corrects his master by playing a disclosing, disarming, bridging and reconciling role, thus 'balancing a leader's hubris' (Kets de Vries, 1990: 751).

Yet, we also strongly believe that the modern jester is more than the manager's alter ego. Although he (or she) hardly qualifies for serving as a role model (and, indeed, we do not want to push her forward as the ultimate organizational ethnographer), we do think organizational ethnographers could draw serious inspiration in the field from his playful role, helping them to improve their 'playful commitment to increasing mutual understanding of the messy, contradictory and all too human nature of the experience' (Badham et al., 2007: 332). Humphreys et al. (2003) do something similar, albeit for different purposes, when taking the playful improvisations of a jazz musician as a metaphor for ethnographing. Those doing field research in organizational settings adopt a role in the field that may already resemble that of the mythical jester in a number of ways. Like jesters, they are 'professional strangers' (Agar, 1980), 'self-reliant loners' (Lofland, 1974), insiders and outsiders at the same time, who approach the field with a somewhat naive wonder about the way people think and act. And, as participant observers, organizational ethnographers (again, like jesters) need to use particular social skills to maintain relationships with all members of the royal household. Yet, unlike the jester, ethnographers tend to take themselves and their work rather seriously (Douglas, 1975; Driessen, 1996). If we are to believe Driessen (1996), fieldworkers even seldom laugh.

Researching serious organizational problems and processes is, however, not necessarily or always best done in a serious manner. We do not propose transforming the organizational ethnographer into a simple joker, nor do we want to turn fieldwork into cabaret entertainment or change organizational ethnographies into comic books. Yet, we believe that adopting some of the jester's use of humour and sense of irony would not only lighten up over-serious ethnographers (see, for similar views, Douglas, 1975; Driessen, 1996; Johansson and Woodilla, 2005), but the subversive and confronting effects of a jester-like positioning might also help the organizational ethnographer to maintain his/her professional strangeness. The thin line between seriousness and humour/irony, as elaborated in Huizinga's (1999) *Homo ludens*, underscores the potential benefits of the jester role model. We mention a few:

- Developing the jester's ability to divert and downplay tensions and address serious problems in a seemingly casual and less confronting manner may be fruitful from a researcher's perspective (Barsoux, 1993a; 1993b), because it encourages people to discuss sensitive topics more openly.

- Adopting the role of the innocent ethnographer (Barley, 1983) or the acceptable incompetent (Lofland and Lofland, 1995) and emphasizing one's ignorance and incompetence may give one a licence, psychologically, to ask more, seemingly sillier, or more provocative questions than organizational members themselves would (Neyland, 2008).
- Breaking the routine rules of everyday life with 'strange' behaviour may help to reveal the taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in mundane, ordinary action (Garfinkel, 1967).
- Assuming the jester's position in between seriousness and lightheartedness and in between proximity and distance, organizational ethnographers may enhance their empathic understanding as an insider while preserving the outsider's capacity for ironic distance and wonderment, thus enabling them to offer a specific, surreal and upside-down perspective that is typical of the jester (Berger, 1997: 73).
- Finally, taking and presenting themselves a little less seriously, ethnographers-cum-jesters could have the effect of producing, paradoxically, some redeeming laughter, leading themselves, thereby, to be taken more seriously (cf. Berger, 1997).

While acknowledging the advantages of taking on aspects of the jester role, we realize that the organizational ethnographer cannot always take the role of court jester too literally, because some circumstances may not call for jesters. The ethnographer-cum-jester who is getting caught up in organizational power games, showing too ironic a demeanour, or breaking too many politically sensitive taboos might await a similarly tragic fate as some of the jesters of yesteryear. Yet, we seriously believe that humourless seriousness is also a rather tragic fate for organizational ethnographers, and assuming the jester role may help to bring a light to the ethnographer's eye and spirits.

conclusion

Ethnography tries to give an in-depth account of the riches of everyday experience and, therefore, fieldworkers develop long-term engagements with those studied and prioritize the latter's experiences and perspectives in their writing. But, by embracing the member role, the ethnographer also runs the risk of adopting the member's poor awareness of his or her own culture. There is no reason to think that ethnographers who immerse themselves in the field are somehow free from the natives' blind spots. Precisely in order to understand 'the natives' point of view', they must try and preserve reflexive distance. We have therefore suggested that organizational ethnographers cherish their place on the margins of organizations and stay somewhat marginal, entering the field with an almost naive wonder about the way people think and act in organizations, and maintaining their engaged, yet simultaneously distanced, playful, and ironic stance. For generating data, developing interpretations, and representing findings, ironies and mysteries that come up in the interplay between data and theory and between the researcher and the researched can be rich sources of

inspiration. Seeing the extraordinary-in-the-ordinary may help to elicit curiosity about people's 'strangeness', as well as challenge the taken-for-granted logic of things, both theirs and ours.

In the various sections of this chapter, we discussed ways in which fieldworkers may support the playfulness, ironic stance or 'wondering distance' while being immersed in the field. The various 'strategies' are not meant to be an exhaustive list, nor are the various approaches clearly demarcated. We could have discussed strategies adopted in the field, such as the ethnomethodologist's deliberate 'rule-breaking' described by Garfinkel, whose concern was also to expose 'the strangeness of an obstinately familiar world' (1967: 38); Neyland's (2008: 101) suggestion to return to previously made field notes to compare activities or situations observed later; Burawoy's (2003) staggered approach of taking time-outs and making focused revisits to the field; strategies developed by more analytically focused ethnographers (for example, Agar, 1986; Lofland, 1995; Snow, Morrill and Anderson, 2003); Bartunek and Louis's (1992) suggestion to bring insiders and outsiders together in joint research teams; Bourdieu's (1990) insistence on reflexivity as a necessary aspect of the research process, not only towards the practices of the researched (as we suggested in this chapter), but also to one's own practices as a researcher; or the detachment of writing itself as a mode of exit. All these strategies boil down to the question of how to maintain or regain the surprise of a newcomer. T.S. Eliot (quoted in Yanow, 1996: v) sounded this theme in his poem 'Little Gidding', when he wrote that the end of our never-ceasing exploration will be to return to the starting point and see it as if for the first time. In order to make the familiar strange, it may thus be fruitful – and fun, for that matter – to assume a sense of irony, thinking of our experiences in the field as if something strange is or has been happening, and adopting an attitude that closely resembles that of the French comic hero Obélix (see for example, Goscinny and Uderzo, 1978) visiting the Romans, the Belgians, or the Brits, tapping his forehead and muttering: 'These [Romans/Belgians/Brits] are crazy!'

notes

¹ 'San Diego Serenade. Used with friendly permission from Fifth Floor Music.

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